



File Code: 1950/2350

Date: October 18, 2002

Subject: **West Side Recreation Trail and Day Use Area**

Dear Friends and Partners of Midewin:

The Forest Service at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie (Midewin) is proposing to construct Midewin's first permanent recreational trail. During this initial public comment period, we are providing you with information on the proposed trail development and invite you to send us your comments.

The Purpose and Need

The rationale for the construction of Midewin's first permanent recreation trail is to promote public recreational use and enjoyment of the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie as directed by the 1996 Illinois Land Conservation Act and outlined in the Midewin Land and Resource Management Plan (Prairie Plan).

Throughout the planning process for the Prairie Plan, we considered and analyzed input from diverse recreational groups, including equestrians, hikers, and bicyclists. We also considered the need for providing open areas to the public and opportunities for education and interpretation of the diverse natural and cultural resources found at Midewin. This trail is being proposed to meet those needs.

Proposed Action

Construction of a trail that would run approximately 7 miles in two segments. One segment would be for shared uses and run approximately 3 miles from the River Road native seed production gardens northward to the State Route 53 overpass. The other segment would be for pedestrian use only and would make an approximate 4-mile loop from the River Road trailhead

westward toward Prairie Creek Woods. The trail is planned to skirt portions of the River Road native seed production gardens. Parking lots at the Route 53 overpass and at River Road are also proposed components of this project, as well as a picnic facility near the River Road trailhead. The Route 53 parking lot is proposed to accommodate horse trailers.

Opportunities exist to:

- Design and route the trail to take advantage of scenic views and watchable wildlife and plant habitat.
- Design the trail so that visitors may see the process of restoring Midewin to the tallgrass prairie ecosystem.
- Design and construct the trail capacity to meet reasonable public demand, creating compatible uses by equestrians, hikers, bicyclists, and other trail users.
- Integrate existing features, as feasible, into trail design; for example, rail beds, roads, trestles, and bridges.



Project Location

The proposed project area is located within the southwestern portion of Midewin in portions of Section 34, T.34 N., R.9 E., Sections 1, 3, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, T.33 N., R.9 E., and Section 6, T. 33 N., R.10 E., Will County, Illinois. The project area lies within an area bounded by State Route 53 on the east, by River Road on the south, and by Midewin's western boundary. The proposed trail's western loop would extend north of Blodgett Road. (Please see the attached map for site location information.)

Invitation to a Field Trip

As part of our scoping process for this project, we will host a public field workshop, where your concerns, suggestions, and wishes pertaining to the development of Midewin's first, permanent public trail will be welcomed. **The workshop will be held Saturday, November 9, at 9:00 A.M.** We will meet first at the Supervisor's Office on State Route 53. If you would like to participate, please call the Midewin Supervisor's Office to RSVP not later than **November 6, 2002**. Remember to dress for a short field hike, as part of the meeting will take place at the trail site.

Existing Conditions

The project area includes old rail beds along which portions of the trail may be located. The terrain of the project area is level to slightly sloping, and vegetation is mostly a mix of grasslands dominated by non-native, cool-season grasses, degraded wetlands, croplands, successional fields of predominantly weedy, herbaceous species, and some successional thickets and groves. There are several prairie and savanna remnants, especially along the western leg of the proposed trail. The project area bisects the largest ongoing restoration project at Midewin, consisting of prairie and wetland vegetation south of South Patrol Road. It also extends into another ongoing

restoration project north of Blodgett Road. Also present within the project corridor are fields planted with native grasses and wildflower beds that produce seed for restoration on Midewin.

Issues and Concerns

Preliminary issues have been identified by the Interdisciplinary (ID) Team of Midewin specialists who will analyze potential effects of trail development for this project. These issues, along with other issues raised during this public scoping process, will be addressed in the Environmental Assessment (EA) for this project:

- Impacts to hydrological conditions.
- Security of the native seed production gardens.
- Impacts to existing wetlands, remnants of native vegetation, and unfragmented areas.
- Protection of Federally Endangered and Threatened species, State Endangered and Threatened species, and Regional Forester Sensitive species and their habitat.
- Protection of heritage resources..
- Security and safety of public trail users.
- Potential concerns of adjacent landowners.
- Potential connections with other regional trails.
- Potential conflicts with hunting activities.
- Potential user conflicts on shared trails.
- Accessibility needs of trail users.
- Vehicle access and traffic impacts.
- Coordinate trail construction and use with restoration, prescribed burning,

grazing, and other management activities.

Compliance with the Prairie Plan

The Prairie Plan for Midewin has been completed and outlines Standards and Guidelines for the development of trails. As stated in the Desired Condition for Midewin, trails for equestrian, hiking, and bicycling use are to be planned to meet the need for a variety of visitor activities and dispersed recreational opportunities.

Public Scoping Process

With this letter, we are initiating the procedures required of the Forest Service by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). We will complete an Environment Assessment (EA) for the proposed activities during the next few months. You have been contacted as part of the public involvement process. Your comments on the proposed action will help complete the EA. Please consider the following specific questions and respond to any or all of them in writing by no later than **December 16, 2002**.

You will have an opportunity to review and comment on the analysis we conduct when I release the Environmental Assessment. My final decision, issued after comments have been reviewed and addressed, will be administratively appealable under 36 CFR Part 215.

If you have any questions about the proposed activities or the Purpose and Need, please feel free to contact Jesse Lovelace, Project Leader, at the address above, by email at jlovelace@fs.fed.us, or by phone at (815) 423-6370. Please submit your written comments by **December 16, 2002** to Jesse Lovelace at the address above. Thank you for your interest in activities at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie.

Sincerely,

/s/ Jodi L Nelson (for):
DAVID L WHEELER
Acting Prairie Supervisor, Midewin
National Tallgrass Prairie

Encl: Project location map

1. Is there any information about the project area (Midewin) that you believe is important in the context of the proposed activities and which the Forest Service might have overlooked?
2. For you or the group you represent, what are the potential effects of this proposal about which you are particularly concerned?
3. Are there reasonable alternative ways to meet the Purpose and Need (the rationale for conducting activities) for which you would like the Forest Service to develop and analyze the environmental effects?
4. Are there issues and concerns, in addition to the ones listed above, which you believe are important and would like to have addressed in the EA? If so, please include your rationale for why they should be analyzed.


Midwin National Tallgrass Prairie


West Side Recreation Trail

and

Day User Area

LEGEND



 Hiking Only Trail



 Multi-use Trail

 Parking

 Public Access

 Administrative Access

 Administrative Road
 Other Jurisdiction Road

 Visitor Center / ELC / Day Use
 Group Campground
 Seed Production Area
 Administrative Site
 Midwin Boundary
 Major Stream
 Open Water
 Cemetery
 Department of the Army
 Illinois DNR
 Municipality

Note: This map shows a proposed trail route. The actual trail route will be designed, located and developed following Prairie Plan direction, standards and guidelines, Forest Service trail handbooks, and further public involvement. Actual trail route and uses may be different than what is shown on this map.

The Forest Service cannot assure the reliability or suitability of this information for a particular purpose. Original data elements were compiled from various sources. This information may be updated, corrected, or otherwise modified without notification. For additional information about this data, contact the Midwin National Tallgrass Prairie Planning Team.

Projection UTM Meters, Zone 16, NAD83, Created 11/01, jbm



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